Margaret Laurence’s Prairie –
“That Place Where the World Began”

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Abstract
Canadian author Margaret Laurence’s Manawaka cycle (The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, The Fire-Dwellers, A Bird in the House and The Diviners) represents the history of a fictional prairie town. My paper aims to discuss how the particular regional environment, where the author’s “way of viewing”, “[her] eyes were formed” [9, 237], became representative for Canadian literature, challenging readers’ perceptions of Canadian identity, place, space, female identity, race or ethnicity, etc. I intend to approach Laurence’s fictional work by means of her own critical essays: Heart of a Stranger and A Place to Stand On (edited by G. Woodcock) and the interviews she gave, in order to discover the connections between her fictional and non-fictional works.

Key words
prairie, Canadian identity, origins, fiction vs. non-fiction, literary environment

Canadian author Margaret Laurence was born in the prairie, her native town Neepawa, in Manitoba, becoming the fictional Manawaka. Although my main interest today is her Manawaka cycle, it is essential to mention that her work can be divided into two main categories according to their geographical setting: the books inspired by her African experience and those dedicated to Canada, including: two collections of short stories, five novels, essays, articles, four books for children, a translation of Somali poetry and prose, an anthology of Nigerian writers, two memoirs and numerous letters.

I will only briefly mention here that she was considered “the most significant creative writer in Canadian literature” [14, vii], “the shaman… [who] brought… together” [Don Bailey qtd. in 14, 16] Canadian authors whom she encouraged, supported, recommended and corresponded to. For her Presbyterian education and
her willingness to help, her increasing social and political activity, her involvement in the Writers’ Union, her Canadian prairie childhood and African experience, as reflected in her representations of these two worlds, Margaret Laurence was “the beginning of everything” to many subsequently successful Canadian writers [Alice Munro qtd. in 14, 144].

For this paper I intend to approach Laurence’s Manawaka cycle, consisting of four novels and a collection of short stories, published between 1964 and 1974: *The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, The Fire-Dwellers, A Bird in the House* and *The Diviners*. Starting from the assumption that the author’s native town should not be considered her hometown, as she stated [9, 3], we have to remark, however, that Manawaka was obviously modelled on her native town and other similar prairie towns. To this end, I draw both upon her own critical essays *Heart of a Stranger* (1976), a collection of travel writing, created between 1964 and 1975 and *A Place to Stand On* (1983, edited by George Woodcock) which includes essays by and about the author, and two of her published interviews, in order to discover the connections between her fictional and non-fictional works. These non-fictional writings shed a new light on her fictional work, opinion shared also by Nora Foster Stovel, which makes me assert there cannot be a better critic than the author herself.

My paper aims to discuss how Margaret Laurence challenged readers’ perceptions of Canadian and female identity, place and space, race and ethnicity, thus creating a particular regional “environment” that became representative for the Canadian literary “environment”. Thus, I will briefly discuss here how Laurence’s prairie is depicted, firstly in her essays and articles, the second part being dedicated to its fictional representations, analysing her work as an entity and not in the common binary opposition fiction vs. non-fiction.

Before realizing that Canada was the place where she really belonged both in life and in fiction, and that the prairie was “that place where the world began” [9, 237], Laurence had lived in Somalia, Ghana and Great Britain, and had written, edited and translated Africa-related works. Starting to write about her own background meant “a return home in a kind of spiritual way” [11, 68]. Inspired in particular by Sinclair Ross and W.O Mitchell, she declared in an interview to Graeme Gibson, that Ross’s book, *As For Me and My House* (1941), written “out of a prairie background which was very similar” to her own, made her think: “it can be done” [2, 198]. In one of her essays she added that this book and Mitchell’s *Who Has Seen the Wind?* (1947) marked a moment of “recognition” and “revelation”
and they were the authors who laid ahead Laurence’s future track “namely to write out of [her] own place, [her] own time, [her] own people”. [10, 243]

For Laurence “the influence of a place on one’s writing” is manifested on two levels. For the sake of this paper, I will reorder her points. She refers to the people and “the physical presence of the place itself”. [9, 4]

Apart from the characters, who are not my interest today (although they are the main interest of my thesis), “the physical presence” of the real Neepawa can be felt in the description of the fictional Manawaka. The prairie, “that place where the world began” [9, 237] was in fact a strange place. Two opposing views should be balanced here. On the one hand, from an early age, Laurence herself as well as all her fictional female protagonists want to leave the place in search of a better, more prosperous and exciting life, so that to leave behind a patriarchal, white-centred society, that was discriminating any form of “the other”. On the other hand, in her essays, the small prairie town is depicted as “never merely flat or uninteresting. Never dull.” [9, 238] and rather as:

“A place of incredible happenings, splendours and revelations, despairs like multitudinous pits of isolated hells. A place of shadow-spookiness, inhabited by the unknowable dead. A place of jubilation and of mourning, horrible and beautiful”. [9, 237]

Probably the most important statement that Laurence makes in her essays is the full realization of the meaning of the prairie for herself, for her protagonists, and subsequently, for us, the readers. The prairie was the world that shaped all the women and men born there, whether fictional or real, that built up their personality, their characters, and their background. In “Down East”, one of the essays of the collection, Margaret Laurence writes a hymn to the small prairie towns, describing them as the ultimate hope for the future, “Are they really anachronisms?”, she asks us, while suggesting her own theory:

“Or may they possibly turn out to be to our culture what the possession of manuscripts in monasteries was to mediaeval Europe during the dark ages? Maybe some of them will survive, and maybe we will need them. Whatever their limitations, it is really only in communities such as these that the individual is known, assessed, valued, seen, and can breathe without battling for air. They may not be our past so much as our future, if we have one.” [9, 180]
But for Margaret Laurence the woman, the prairie was above all, and I quote her: “A world which gave me my own lifework to do, because it was here that I learned the sight of my own particular eyes.” [9, 244] Growing up in a small community, being educated there, Laurence made her first impressions of the world, “[her] eyes” and “[her] way of viewing” [9, 237] being formed by this setting. The young Margaret left her native town quite soon, unaware of its implications for her own life and writing:

“When I was eighteen, I couldn’t wait to get out of that town, away from the prairies. I did not know then that I would carry the land and town all my life within my skull, that they would form the mainspring and source of the writing I was to do, wherever and however far away I might live.” [9, 241-42]

It was probably when she stopped writing about Africa, that she realized the full implications of her background. She had the courage to scrutinize this new world that was emerging and experienced certainty and confidence, realizing that language, people, places from her past “would come back to me that I had forgotten, that I didn’t know I even remembered” [11, 68], as she remarked. Interestingly, in the first article of her collection of essays, Margaret Laurence names the result of this process of creation and remembering “a town of the mind, [her] own private world” [9, 3], neither real, nor fictional, but a mixture of the two, a place which resonates in Canadians’ hearts, all sharing a common background, despite the geographical wideness of the country.

Another argument in favour of the parallelism fiction-critical work that I’m focusing on is the topic and genre of the essays and articles. In the “Foreword” to Heart of a Stranger, Margaret Laurence confesses, and I believe it is an essential confession for her interpreters, that without much initial awareness on her part, these essays deal with, and I quote: “themes in a non-fiction way before I found myself ready to deal with them in the broader form of the novel” [9, viii]. Not even realizing it, all these essays and articles were “an early working-out, in non-fiction” [9, 158] of the topics that her fiction was about to develop more thoroughly. They are “also a record of the long journey back home” [9, viii], testimonies of the shift from Africa to Canada as fictional settings, of the sources of her art, and I would personally dare to argue, testimonies of Margaret Laurence’s own personality.

But let us see what the fictional prairie looks like. Do the non-fictional and fictional perspectives differ; does the prairie have distinct connotations to the characters? Again, I will start from Laurence’s critical comments. In another
article, referring to the first novel of the Manawaka series, the novelist wonders: “Were the descriptions of… the prairie in the drought … in fact Hagar or were they me? [9, 83] The best answer would probably be, both. On the one hand, it is the author’s choice what to describe and when to describe, keeping in mind that the full image of the prairie is enriched with new elements in each novel. On the other hand, the descriptions are not “out of character” [9, 84] they express each protagonist’s perception of the place they inhabit.

Moving to the second part, I will present a personal choice of the most relevant mentions of the prairie in each of the five books of the Manawaka cycle, summarizing the implications the prairie had on the protagonists.

The most memorable images of The Stone Angel (1964) are the ones centred on the monument in the cemetery. This statue was the main witness of the harsh cold season in the prairie: “Her wings in winter were pitted by the snow and in summer by the blown grit” [4, 1]. However, the prairie actually starts to exist for Hagar Currie when she marries Bram Shipley. It is only then that she moves from downtown to “the valley outside town” [4, 39], from “the second brick house to be built in Manawaka” [4, 4], in a house that “was square and frame, two-storied, the furniture shoddy and second-hand, the kitchen reeking and stale” [4, 43]. Only now did the prairie seem overwhelming, even dangerous, as the seasons could really show their worst aspects, as young Hagar was noticing:

“I used to like snowstorms in town, when I was a girl, the feeling of being under siege but safe within a stronghold. Out in the country it was a different matter, with so few lights as landmarks, and the snow lying in ribbed dunes for miles that seemed endless. Here I felt cut off from any help, severed from all communication, for there were times when we couldn’t have got out to the highway and into town to save our immortal souls, whatever the need.” [4, 76]

We can easily notice that the prairie is no longer the one in Margaret Laurence’s memoirs, not even at summer time; instead it is a desolated place, as if deserted by any living beings.

In A Jest of God (1966), the main female character Rachel Cameron and her boyfriend Nick Kazlik find refuge in a secluded place by the river side, turning it into their love nest. This time, the prairie acquires romantic implications in the characters’ eyes:

“Beside the river… [t]he grass is thick and much greener. The willows grow beside the Wachakwa, and their languid branches bend and almost touch the amber water swifting over the pebbles. … The darkening sky is hugely blue, gashed with rose,
blood, flame pouring from the volcano or wound or flower of the lowering sun."

*The Fire-Dwellers* (1969) is the only novel of the series not set in the prairie, but Stacey, after nearly twenty years in Vancouver, still struggles to hide her roots, still believing that it is so obvious for everybody that she is from a small prairie town. Stacey’s place of origin only resides in her memories, mainly flashbacks of her family members. However, the novel focuses on the same prairie, although absent, for the simple reason that Stacey’s choice to run to the big city does not initially seem a better solution. The big city was perceived as an escape, as an alternative, but its potential dangers make Stacey nervous, as nervous as Laurence herself was about cities and wilderness, too. Coming to terms with the sense of place, Stacey has to accept that her identity consists of both Stacey Cameron, the prairie little girl and young woman that she used to be before marriage, when still in her hometown, and Stacey MacAindra, the wife and mother that she is now, living in the suburbs of Vancouver.

The most representative short story of the collection *A Bird in the House* (1970) is “The Loons”, depicting the prairie from another angle – the prairie as wild life, whose animals and vegetation are endangered by the intrusion of people. The young story teller Vanessa MacLeod remembers her holidays spent at the summer cottage her family owned near Diamond Lake. The environment is totally different from the previous books: spruce trees, ferns, “sharp-branched raspberry bushes”, moss, weeds and grass, “wild strawberry plants” [7, 111]. For the ones who want to hear, the greatest attraction of the place is the “ululating sound, the crying of the loons, and no one who has heard it can ever forget it” [7, 114]. Years later, returning there as an adult, Vanessa discovers an unknown place:

“The small pier which my father had built was gone, and in its place there was a large and solid pier built by the government, for Galloping Mountain was now a national park, and Diamond Lake had been re-named Lake Wapakata, for it was felt that an Indian name would have a greater appeal to tourists.” [7, 119]

But what really made the place different, was an absence, a loss, the quietness all around, without “that long-drawn call, half mocking and half plaintive, spearing through the stillness across the lake.” [7, 119]

As far as the last novel is concerned, *The Diviners* (1974), also the most complex novel of the cycle, there are several other perspectives on the prairie that could be discussed, probably in a separate paper. One of the aspects that I intentionally left
aside so far is that Margaret Laurence’s prairie is a multi-ethnic and multi-racial place, the home of several minority groups: Scottish, Irish, Ukrainian, German and Icelandic and mainly, Metis. Laurence allows for various voices to be explicitly articulated within her texts, making room for the “other”, although the patriarchal and conservative society of Manawaka establishes a clear division of the social groups, ignoring the lower classes, making them almost inaudible. The most oppressed of all are the Tonnerres, a Metis family that haunts all the five works, connecting them, as much as the common setting of the prairie.

A second element that connects the essays with this novel is the female protagonist Morag Gunn, arguably an alter ego of the author. A novelist herself, raising a child on her own, financially supported by publishing only, Morag Gunn reminds us the most of Margaret Laurence. For both of them, writing is a search for personal identity and for a place that they could call “home”, which is not in far-away places, but in Canada. As Laurence was confessing in her essay “Road from the Isles”, it was only after her journey to Scotland, a journey that Morag fictionally makes, too, that she realized that where she belonged was the small prairie town in Manitoba where she was born. She succinctly summarizes this: “It is as though in my fiction I knew exactly where to go, but in my life I didn’t, as yet.” [9, 158]

Presenting the prairie from two different perspectives, as reflected in both Margaret Laurence’s essays and in her fiction, I hopefully managed to demonstrate that the prairie was “that place where the world began” for the author and her protagonists as well.

In conclusion, for Canadians, in particular and for readers from all over the world, Margaret Laurence takes “the cultural material of a place and transform[s] it into a mythology that the people of the region can identify as their own” [William Westfall qtd. in 12, 236]. Her novels “[play] this mythical role for Canadians”, as “Canadian novelists had served us as the providers of necessary myths” [16, 9]. Foster Stovel believes that the novelist “metamorphoses the actual town of Neepawa into the mythological microcosm of Manawaka” [1, 192] and as I was arguing in the introduction, it is this fictional world that forges an identity, and above all, a specific Canadian environment.